

Today I have written to Ambassador Nikki Haley, our Ambassador to the United Nations, to urge her to call an emergency special session of the U.N. Security Council to evaluate which United Nations mechanisms, including U.N. Security Council resolutions, should be pursued to alleviate the humanitarian suffering inside Venezuela.

As humanitarian concerns mount, human rights abuses of Venezuela are rampant. Last month, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights told the U.N. Security Council that this year Venezuelan security forces “systematically resorted to the arbitrary detention of more than 5,000 protestors.”

A more recent report by Human Rights Watch and Foro Penal, a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization, documents how Venezuelan security forces have subjected political opponents to “torture involving electric shock and asphyxiation.”

In response, Luis Almagro, the Secretary General of the OAS, has convened a series of hearings to receive testimony to ascertain whether members of the Venezuelan Government have committed crimes against humanity that should be referred to the International Criminal Court for prosecution. These efforts deserve our attention and our support.

Against this alarming backdrop, we require no explanation for why the United States has received more asylum requests from Venezuela than from any other nationality for 2 years straight.

These challenges will only grow as Venezuela’s economy continues to collapse. The country is in a selective default on its bonds. Hyperinflation and rapid currency devaluation are ravaging family incomes. This week, the country’s parallel exchange rate reached 12,000 times the official rate, meaning that the average Venezuelan now earns less than \$10 a month.

The reasons for this collapse are simple. Venezuela’s economy is plagued by endemic corruption and gross mismanagement. As this calamity grows, Senators need to be aware that Venezuela will eventually need a major IMF program that may well surpass the \$17 billion intervention that Ukraine required in 2014. The international community will have to respond, which will also include, of course, the United States.

We also need to recognize that Russia and China are now major stakeholders in Venezuela, in our hemisphere, and will be at the table as the international community copes with the pending collapse.

Russia, in particular, is playing geopolitics with the situation—refinancing Venezuela’s debt, offering loans in return for financial stakes in U.S.-based CITGO, securing stakes in Venezuela’s oil industry, and expanding its influence in our hemisphere.

In response to these growing challenges, the Trump administration has

applied greater pressure by imposing targeted sanctions against a number of individuals, including President Maduro. With this designation, President Maduro has joined the list of notorious heads of state on U.S. sanction list, including the likes of North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Zimbabwe’s former President Robert Mugabe, and Panama’s former President Manuel Noriega.

President Trump has also imposed financial sanctions blocking the issuance of new bonds to fund the Maduro regime’s ongoing repressive and economic mismanagement. The bond market has been one of the last lifelines for the Maduro government. Investors are right to lose trust in Venezuela’s ability to pay its debt.

We must recognize, however, that sanctions alone will not resolve the challenges the people of Venezuela are facing. We need a comprehensive strategy that utilizes all elements of U.S. diplomacy. We must provide critical foreign assistance to help mitigate the humanitarian crisis and bolster essential support for human rights and democratic civil society.

In May I introduced S. 1018, a bipartisan bill that lays out a comprehensive strategy for U.S. policy. My bill includes humanitarian assistance and funding to protect and promote human rights and democracy. It also includes a more aggressive approach to tackling the endemic corruption.

Earlier this month, the House of Representatives approved its version of this bill. It is time for the Senate to act. While I see an opportunity for bipartisanship in the Senate on U.S. policy toward Venezuela, I must say that I was alarmed by President Trump’s statement in August about a potential military option. Such cavalier comments are not helpful and, once again, call into question whether he has the temperament and judgment for dealing with serious national security challenges.

We must rise to the challenge of Venezuela as a great nation, bringing our full diplomatic resources and skills to bear and avoiding stooping to mere saber rattling.

I urge our colleagues to take on this challenge, to help the people of Venezuela, who are suffering from this humanitarian crisis, and to allow America’s entire toolkit to be used to help resolve this problem in our hemisphere.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RUSSIA INVESTIGATION

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I rise today concerned about the threats to

the special counsel’s critical investigation of Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Over the last several weeks, a growing chorus of irresponsible and reckless voices have called for President Trump to shut down Special Counsel Mueller’s investigation. At first, these calls came from the fringes of our political discourse—those who refuse to put our country and our security before base political instincts.

Earlier this year, many of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle were right to push back on these misdirected calls and urge that the special counsel be allowed to do his job without interference. However, in recent weeks, those voices seem to be growing in stridency and in volume. Just this weekend, one major news organization suggested that Special Counsel Mueller could be involved in a coup against the President. One senior adviser at the White House has now outrageously alleged that “the fix was in against Donald Trump from the beginning.” Those statements are reckless. They are inappropriate, and they are extremely worrying. They are also at odds with the President’s own lawyers who have pledged to cooperate with the special counsel.

Beyond being irresponsible, the seemingly coordinated nature of these claims should alarm us all—particularly since, in recent days, these baseless accusations have been repeated by several Members of the House of Representatives.

I believe it is up to every Member of this institution, Republican or Democratic, to make a clear and unambiguous statement that any attempt by this President to remove Special Counsel Mueller from his position or to pardon key witnesses in any effort to shield them from accountability or shut down the investigation would be a gross abuse of power and a flagrant violation of executive branch responsibilities and authorities. These truly are red lines, and we simply cannot allow them to be crossed.

Let’s take a moment to remember why Special Counsel Mueller was appointed in the first place and why it remains so critical that he be permitted to finish his job without obstruction.

Recall, last spring, when we were all reeling from a series of confounding actions by this President, beginning with the firing of FBI Director Jim Comey on May 9. Mr. Comey was fired just 2 months after publicly revealing the FBI’s ongoing investigation of the Trump campaign and—as we would find out later—after several attempts by this President to improperly influence Director Comey.

Try to put yourself back into those dangerous days. Director Comey’s dismissal was met with confusion and widespread condemnation. We needed a stabilizing action from our Nation’s law enforcement leadership. We needed some certainty that the facts would be found and brought to light, regardless of what they were.

Eight days after Mr. Comey's firing, Trump appointee and Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein appointed Robert Mueller to oversee the investigation into "any links and/or coordination between the Russian government and individuals associated with the campaign of President Donald Trump" and "any matters that arose or may arise directly from the investigation."

His appointment reassured Americans that there will be a full and thorough law enforcement investigation. The announcement was met with support on both sides of the aisle and received nearly universal praise. In fact, many of the same people who are attacking him today praised Mr. Mueller's appointment just months ago.

Indeed, there is much to praise. The fact is, Robert Mueller has impeccable credentials as a man of the law. He has assembled a team that includes some of the Nation's best investigators, and he is leading the investigation with the professionalism it deserves.

Mr. Mueller is a dedicated Vietnam war veteran and a lifelong Republican, appointed to his current role by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, also a Republican. In fact, all of the major players to date in this investigation—former Director Comey, current FBI Director Rosenstein, and even Attorney General Sessions, who has had to recuse himself—are all Republicans. The charges that some have made that somehow Democratic political bias has crept into this investigation are baseless, given the makeup of the leadership team.

In recent weeks, much has been made of some political opinions expressed by an FBI agent during the election last year. This specious line of argument conveniently ignores the fact that as soon as Mr. Mueller learned about those comments, he immediately removed that agent in question from the investigation. If anything, this incident only adds to Mr. Mueller's credibility as a fair and independent investigator.

I stand here as the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. We are in the midst of our own investigation into Russian incursion, and I am proud of the way Chairman BARR and our committee has taken on this very difficult task.

We have made tremendous progress uncovering the facts of Russian interference in our elections. Our committee's work helped expose the dark underbelly of disinformation on many of our social media platforms. We have successfully pressed for the full accounting of Russian cyber efforts to target our State electoral systems, and, despite the initial denials of any Russian contacts during the election, this committee's efforts have helped uncover numerous and troubling high-level engagements between the Trump campaign and Russian affiliates, many of which have only been revealed in recent months.

We have a lot of work to do. Our committee has gone out of its way to ensure continued bipartisan backing for this effort, and I am committed to seeing the effort through. However, it should be very clear that our committee cannot and will not stand as a substitute for Mr. Mueller's investigation.

As Chairman BARR and I have noted on numerous occasions, the FBI is responsible for determining any criminal activities related to this inquiry. As such, Mueller has already moved to indict two individuals and has negotiated two additional guilty pleas. This was an investigative path reserved solely for law enforcement, and it is essential that it be permitted to go on unimpeded.

The country no doubt remains severely divided on the question of the last election. However, the national security threat facing us today should demand that we rise above partisan differences. No matter the political divide, surely each of us—and all Americans—should want to know the truth of what happened during last year's election, and, no doubt, we want to know that as quickly as possible.

The President has long called the investigation into Russian meddling into the 2016 election a witch hunt, and he has done much to discredit the intelligence community's unanimous assessment of Russian interference in our election. The failure of this White House to lead a whole-of-government approach to prevent this type of election interference in the future—either by the Russians or some other adversary—defies understanding. The President's refusal to accept the intelligence community's assessment and his blatant disregard for ensuring that Russia never again infiltrates our election process has been unnerving and cause for significant concern.

In recent days, the President has said he is not considering removing Special Counsel Mueller, but the President's track record on this front is a source of concern. I am certain most of my colleagues believed he wouldn't fire Jim Comey either.

Firing Mr. Mueller, or any other of the top brass involved in this investigation, would not only call into question this administration's commitment to the truth but also to our most basic concept, the rule of law. It also has the potential to provoke a constitutional crisis.

In the United States of America, no one—no one—is above the law, not even the President. Congress must make clear to the President that firing the special counsel or interfering with his investigation by issuing pardons of essential witnesses is unacceptable and would have immediate and significant consequences.

I hope my concerns are unfounded—in many ways, I had hoped I would never have to make this kind of speech—but there are troubling signs. It is critical that all of us, as elected

officials and as citizens, speak out against these threats now before it is too late.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I rise to deliver the second in a series of floor speeches that I offer as I close out my time in the Senate.

This afternoon, I want to talk about Americans' relationship with telecommunications and technology companies and what that means for their access to essential services and for their privacy.

When I entered the Senate in July of 2009, then-Majority Leader Harry Reid asked me to serve on the Judiciary Committee. I pointed out that there are a lot of lawyers in the Senate and that I wasn't one of them, but he said he needed Members with my perspective on the committee. I wondered how my background could possibly serve me on Judiciary, but it did—almost immediately—when in December of that year, Comcast announced its intention to acquire NBCUniversal.

I happened to know a lot about the effects of media consolidation because I used to work in media. When powerful corporations are permitted to acquire other powerful corporations, it is the American consumers who are left facing higher prices, fewer choices, and even worse service from their telecommunications providers. I questioned why an already powerful company should be allowed to get even bigger and thus extract more leverage over consumers and the businesses reliant on its platform.

It was through my work on Comcast and NBCUniversal that I learned about the rising costs of internet, phone, and TV services, as well as the importance of preserving net neutrality. I also became interested in how giant telecommunications companies, as well as ever-evolving tech companies, were treating the massive troves of user data they were collecting on a perpetual basis.

I believe consumers have a fundamental right to know what information is being collected about them. I believe they have a right to decide whether they want to share that information and with whom they want to share it and when. I believe consumers have a right to expect that companies that store their personal information will store it securely.